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PHUM
SUBJECT: GAZA SITREP, JANUARY 13, 1200

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

11. (S) Summary: Israeli media reports PM Olmert indicated to foreign leaders January 12 that he was prepared to give Egyptian-sponsored cease-fire talks a chance prior to a decision on a third phase of Operation Cast Lead. At the same time, Olmert stated in a speech to Israeli southern city mayors that Hamas will meet "Israel's iron fist" should it not agree to cease rocket fire and weapons smuggling activities. Operation Cast Lead continues, with heavy fighting overnight and continued airstrikes and bombardment; Israeli media reports IDF forces entering Gaza City suburbs early January 13. DAO officers observed continued IDF deployments to points south in the event of an expanded operation. Embassy and ConGen Jerusalem officers continue to work with the ICRC and GOI to coordinate two possible U.S.-led multinational evacuations of over 850 foreign nationals -- including 138 AMCITS -- through the Erez and Rafah border crossings. The evacuations are dependent on Egyptian approval to depart through Rafah, and ICRC facilitation and escort efforts in both cases. Israel announced a humanitarian pause between 0900 and 1200 local. GOI officials expect 100 truckloads of humanitarian assistance to transit the Kerem Shalom crossing January 13; Erez remains open for urgent humanitarian cases only. Early reports indicate the Karni crossing will be closed due to security concerns. Unidentified attackers fired shots across the border from Jordan at an Israeli Border Police patrol at the Rabin crossing near Eilat. No injuries were reported; a joint Israeli-Jordanian team is reportedly investigating the incident. On the diplomatic front, the German FM Steinmeier concluded a January 11-12 visit, Spanish FM Moratinos is here today as is ICRC President Kellenberger. UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon arrives on January 15. End Summary.

Political Developments

12. (SBU) Israeli media outlets reported extensively on on-going talks in Cairo, as well as Hamas Prime Minister Haniya's taped speech calling for an immediate cease-fire due to extensive destruction in Gaza. According to the press, Hamas emissaries arrived in Cairo during the evening of January 12 for cease-fire talks with Egyptian officials. The press also reported that PM Olmert indicated to foreign leaders he was ready to give the Egyptian-sponsored talks a chance prior to a decision to expand into a third phase of Operation Cast Lead. Meanwhile, Olmert took a decidedly harder line during a January 12 speech to southern city mayors and regional council members in Ashkelon, calling for a cessation of Hamas rocket fire and smuggling -- anything less will "slam into Israel's iron fist." He made a point of noting that Israel's war aims did not include dismantling of Hamas, according to a televised Olmert statement picked up by Al-Jazeera.

¶3. (C) The IDF Spokesman reported January 13 that IDF ground forces were involved overnight in several firefights, killing an estimated 30 Hamas operatives. According to this spokesman, two tunnels rigged with explosive in the north near the Gaza security fence were uncovered by IDF forces. Additionally, Israel Air Force (IAF) aircraft attacked over 60 targets overnight, including tunnels near Rafah, rocket launch sites, and against Hamas operatives located in various buildings such as houses, a hotel and a mosque.

¶4. (C) While the Cabinet has not yet been asked to authorize a so-called third stage of operations, media outlets report a steady escalation of IDF forces including the deployment of reserve units, leading one commentator to refer to the current state of hostilities as "stage 2.5." Backed by artillery and attack helicopter support, Israeli troops moved into Gaza City suburbs early January 13. Residents told the Associated Press that Israeli tanks rolled into the densely populated neighborhood of Tel Hawwa on the southern edge of Gaza City. Media outlets report several IDF soldiers were wounded during firefights through the course of the evening; four IDF soldiers were wounded -- one seriously -- due to friendly fire late January 12. An IDF officer was seriously wounded after entering a booby-trapped building in northern Gaza. Media outlets report three rockets landing in the Negev early January 13. Nearly 950 Palestinians have been killed during Operation Cast Lead, along with over 4,000 who have been injured. Israeli casualty totals stand at 10 soldiers and three civilians killed, with several hundred

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soldiers wounded.

¶5. (S) DAO reports January 12 the IDF continues to concentrate military operations on the northern sector of the Gaza Strip. However, heavy construction equipment, refuelers, and maintenance vehicles -- including road graters which could be used to build a hard surface road -- were observed heading southwest, perhaps in support of a larger push in southern Gaza, where media outlets such as Al-Jazeera report hostilities in the vicinity of Khan Younis. DAO officers note a slow buildup of ground forces in the center and south Gaza Strip. In addition, a large number of M-113 armored personnel carriers moved out of the Tse'elim National Ground Training Center.

Humanitarian

¶6. (C) The Embassy and ConGen continue to work with the ICRC and GOI to coordinate a U.S.-led multinational evacuation of over 850 foreign nationals -- including 138 AMCITS -- from the Gaza Strip. The evacuation has been postponed from the originally targeted departure of Wednesday, January 14 as ICRC is overwhelmed with other priorities -- including the January 13-14 visit of ICRC President Kellenberger to Gaza (including Shifa Hospital) and Israel (Sderot) -- and cannot provide required escorts. Current plans involve two evacuations: the first for foreign nationals located in northern Gaza (where most remaining Amcits are located) through Erez and on to Jordan, and the second for foreign nationals located points south of Gaza City through Rafah. The MOD/IDF have approved the evacuation through Rafah -- including guarantees that the IAF will not bomb the Philadelphia corridor during the evacuation -- and remains committed to facilitating the Erez northern evacuation. Egyptian approval for the Rafah southern evacuation is still pending. The ICRC is expected to facilitate both evacuations; we are currently awaiting word from ICRC on a departure date with the hope of conducting both evacuations by the end of the week. Embosffs briefed evacuation plans and coordination efforts January 12 to over 30 members of the

diplomatic community whose nationals are hoping to participate in the evacuations. Emboffs continue to engage with the GOI on a separate evacuation for Palestinian employees and partners.

¶17. (SBU) The IDF declared another humanitarian pause on January 13, scheduled to take place from 0900 to 1200 local; the UN has confirmed the pause. A humanitarian pause took place between 1000 and 1300 local on January 12. The Nahal Oz fuel terminal was closed on January 12 due to security issues and remains closed January 13. Some 300,000 liters of diesel and 200 tons of cooking gas are still waiting to be picked up on the Gaza side of the border. The GOI reported January 13 that it expects to transport 100 truckloads of goods into Gaza through Kerem Shalom. The Erez crossing is open for urgent humanitarian cases only -- no trucks. Early reports indicate Karni may be closed January 13 due to shooting in the area.

¶18. (SBU) Media reported January 12 that the GOI was investigating how a night-vision security camera and other electronics equipment ended up in a humanitarian shipment seized at Kerem Shalom. UNWRA later clarified January 12 that the equipment had been approved by the Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) for the power plant and to repair transmission lines.

¶19. (C) The IDF considered setting up a field hospital to treat Palestinians either in Gaza or Israeli territory. However, the ICRC assessed the establishment of a field hospital as premature and unnecessary as long as Shifa Hospital in Gaza and secondary hospitals remain operational, and medical evacuations are processed. According to January 12 discussion at the humanitarian coordination cell, the IDF has decided for the time being to suspend plans to set up the field hospital based on the ICRC's assessment.

¶110. (U) The "Free Gaza" boat that had been destined for Gaza has returned to Cyprus with mechanical problems.

Diplomacy

¶11. (C) German FM Frank-Walter Steinmeier was in Israel from January 11-12 to discuss the offer Germany made to Egypt to provide technical support and training to combat smuggling along the Philadelphi corridor. German Political Officer Uwe Schmalz told PolOff on January 13 that FM Livni welcomed any

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contribution that could prevent smuggling of arms and said that such efforts could help bring about a cease-fire. However, Livni emphasized, both privately and in a press conference with Steinmeier, that Israel will determine when the fighting should stop and that only through deterrence could Israel stop the rocket fire. Schmalz said that the State Secretary from the German Ministry of Interior was already in Egypt discussing details of the assistance, stressing that Germany was only planning to work on the Egyptian side of the border. Schmalz added that Steinmeier did not come with any new initiative to bring about a cease-fire, and told Livni that UNSCR 1860 is the right framework to end the fighting. FM Livni is scheduled to meet with Spanish FM Moratinos in Jerusalem this afternoon.

¶12. (SBU) UN SYG Ban Ki-Moon plans to visit the region on January 15. The MFA issued an statement January 12 rejecting the "one-sided" resolution of the UN Human Rights Council. According to the statement, Israel characterized the resolution as irrelevant" and adopted without the support of western and democratic states, including Canadian opposition and abstentions from 13 other states including several EU members, Japan, Korea, Ukraine, Switzerland, Cameroon, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Southern Borders

¶13. (C) Israeli media reported that gunshots were fired at Israel Border Police from the Jordanian side of the Rabin border crossing near Eilat. Israeli forces reportedly returned fire, but were unable to identify the attackers. The GOI has submitted an official complaint with the Government of Jordan; a joint Israeli-Jordanian team is reportedly investigating the incident. No injuries were reported; the crossing is currently closed.

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